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CH'AN NEWSLETTER

No. 56 September, 1986

ONE AND TEN THOUSAND

(A short talk given March 20, 1980 by Master Sheng-Yen)

The Sixth Patriarch said,

"It is necessary to explain in ten thousand ways,
but all of them, after all, are traced back to
one principle".

To explain we make use of words, but we know that the
Ch'an sect does not rely upon a written or spoken language.
So whatever is explained cannot be Ch'an. It could be attempted
in 10,000 ways and 10,000 times - and it would still not be Ch'an.

The word "explain" in the first sentence refers to the mind
that makes distinctions. The "ten thousand ways" signify all the
varied explanations that might be presented. One reads earlier
in the sutra that, according to the Sixth Patriarch, anything in
this world can be explained - anything in heaven, on earth, in
our human world - including all sentient beings, all deeds, words,
mental activities. However, none of these explanations would be
Ch'an.

As I have said, the Ch'an sect is not based upon any written
or spoken language and yet it has some of the most voluminous
literature of all. Regarding this seeming paradox, someone once
asked a Zen Master, "If it is said that, regarding the Buddha
Dharma, Sakyamuni Buddha has not uttered one single word, then
how is it that there is so much Buddha Dharma found in the palace
of the Dragons?" The Master replied that that was indeed true.
Not one word could be uttered, but rather, two or three or more.

Whereas the first principle in Buddhism (Ch'an or Buddha
Nature) cannot be spoken, the second and third principles, on the
other hand, can. It is really very difficult to accurately des-
cribe and explain ordinary objects. It is even more difficult if
one tries to describe people; if you've never met someone and have
just heard about him from someone else, or have read about him, it

is altogether different from the experience of personally knowing him. This is also true for Ch'an or Buddha Nature.

There is a Chinese saying to the effect that in the spring when the water in the river becomes warm, it is the ducks that know this first. The ducks paddling in the water can immediately feel it grow warmer, again pointing out the superiority of experience.

At a retreat last year someone asked what it would be like after enlightenment. I told him that there was no way to answer such a question, and that there was no way of knowing what it is like until you are there. Someone at the retreat had never eaten a mango. Some of the others tried to explain what it was like to him. They described it's shape and size and color and taste, but in no way could he understand what it was like. After the retreat, someone bought him a mango. He tasted it - and knew. Yet when asked what it tasted like, he couldn't say.

Returning to the stanza above, it says, "It is necessary to explain in ten thousand ways". In two ways it's meaning becomes clear. One could attempt a physical description. This would call for many words, possibly more than 10,000 and yet it might still not be complete. One could also speak of the many methods which can be used to reach the goal of Buddhahood. There is mention of 84,000 such methods in the sutras. Here, 84,000 refers merely to a very large number. To make these practices clear, all kinds of descriptions are necessary, many of them very lengthy. Language as a means of description or communication is necessary, but not when using the best method.

"But all of them, after all, are traced back to one principle." The roots, the foundations, are traced back to one - but this "one principle" itself cannot be described in words. According to Ch'an, it is not established on any particular language or description because it simply cannot be described that way. When it is described, it is not that one principle. In fact, in calling this the first principle, it is already not that principle because we are trying to attach a description to it. Since language is necessary, however, and since we want some means of expression, I shall continue to use this term "principle" as a method. In our daily life we find language to be very important, but here we see that it is neither so important nor so necessary for functioning. In fact, we may find that this way of communicating is not even very practical. If one lives genuinely, language is not necessary. It is useless.

During the retreat no one was permitted to talk. At first everyone thought this rule was too confining. However, after a couple of days they found that they could get along quite well. Communication without words is, in fact, in many ways superior. Many unfortunate events in our everyday world have their origins in words.

Were people allowed to talk freely amongst themselves during a retreat, they wouldn't be able to devote themselves to practicing. Therefore, whenever I saw someone talking, I scolded him. Some people felt hurt over such encounters but soon recovered. Others continued to be resentful. Many, however, realized that they had

come to grow closer by not talking - that communication in this way is more genuine. It adds fervor to one's practice and eventually helps one to derive some benefit, some experience. Oddly, were such a practitioner to be asked what he felt, he wouldn't be able to describe his experience. Were you to ask a Ch'an Master what the first principle is, he might say that it is like the wooden horse whining to the wind or the earthen cow barking at the moon. Who would be able to hear such a barking cow? Who would be able to hear such a whining horse? According to the same Ch'an Master, a leper might be able to hear the barking cow through his eyebrows. To hear the horse, however, he would have to rub his eye-sockets.

I want to ask you a question now. There is a person who has gone out but he has not left home and yet you cannot find him at home. What kind of person is this?

You may think that this a puzzle to be solved, but I want you to understand that this is a kung-an, and kung-ans are not to be solved or thought about as puzzles. You might or might not find that there is just this Ch'an, just this First Principle.

The philosophy of the Hua Yen sect tells how all the Buddhas of the past, present and future are always turning the great Dharma Wheel at the tip of a hair. This can be explained quite readily. At the tip of a needle held in my hand all of the functions of the light bulbs in this room are expressed. All comes to one principle. But is this principle great or small? We should not speak of these comparisons. In fact that one principle is as small as cannot be smaller and as great as cannot be greater.

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***** NEWS ITEMS *****

Shih-fu informs us that six people in Taiwan will be ordained at the end of the month, one of whom is Kaiser Truong.

Shih-fu will return to New York on Oct. 19, 1986.

There will be a Beginner's Meditation Class on October 25 at 9AM. All those interested please call the Center. (718-592-6593). The cost is \$40.

The retreat schedule is as follows: #1. Thanksgiving Retreat, Thurs. Nov. 27, 1986 at 7:00 to Thurs. Dec 4th. #2 Christmas Retreat, Thurs. Dec 25, 1986 at 7:00 PM to Thurs. Jan, 1, 1987. The cost is \$60. for members and \$120 for non-members. Everybody interested please register as soon as possible.

Weekend sittings are held every first weekend of the month. For more information, please contact the Center.

Tuesday night meditation and Sunday open-house activities are held as usual.

ALL ARE WELCOME

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